THE POPULAR-THEATER MOVEMENT IN FRANCE: ROMAIN ROLLAND AND THE *REVUE D'ART DRAMATIQUE*

BY

HELEN WHITMAN MACHAN

B.A., James Millikin University, 1921
M.A., Columbia University, 1929

AN ABSTRACT OF A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN FRENCH
IN THE GRADUATE COLLEGE OF THE
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A popular-theater movement which was initiated and encouraged by the leading dramatic periodical in France, the *Revue d'Art Dramatique*, assumed something of the aspect of a crusade during the period 1895-1903. These eight years represent the peak of the movement, marked in particular by the successful founding of Maurice Pottecher's popular-theater experiment at Bussang in 1895, and by the publication in 1903 of Romain Rolland's volume *Le Théâtre du Peuple*, in which he expressed his theories on the popular theater and criticized various experiments already being carried out.

Some reflection of the general interest in contemporary social problems and their relation to art and literature was to be found in various well-known literary reviews, including the *Mecure de France* and the *Revue Politique et Littéraire (Revue Bleue)*. As early as 1897 the *Revue d'Art Dramatique* (founded in 1886) was concerned with the establishing of a popular theater, and soon it began to devote its efforts toward that end. Ten years after its first issue, the *Revue* became the tribunal and the champion of all dramatists who dreamed of art for the people, including Romain Rolland and Maurice Pottecher. The review was dedicated to social problems and to the important role that the theater should perform in helping to solve them. In general its aim was to fight for the ideas of the Théâtre Libre, that is, for liberty of expression, for experimentation, for revivifying the theater. The staff of the *Revue d'Art Dramatique* that was particularly interested in establishing a theater and a suitable repertory for the masses, did not intend to exclude the bourgeoisie and the elite, but it was above all concerned with the proletariat especially in Paris, who up to that time had turned to the *café-concert* in their leisure hours. The group was eager also to have the

popular-theater movement spread throughout the provinces. Furthermore, it was those on the staff of the *Revue* who, with zeal and enthusiasm, urged the plan of writing suitable dramas for a popular theater of a high order. They formed a nucleus around which the popular-theater movement developed.

Romain Rolland, always a champion of human rights and justice for all, was one of the more prominent members of the popular-theater group and an active collaborator of the *Revue.* His ideas, opinions, and suggestions, published in a series of essays and later collected in a volume entitled *Le Théâtre du Peuple: Essai d'esthétique d'un théâtre nouveau* (first published in 1903), have been an important source of material for the author of this study, as have been many other articles published in the *Revue d'Art Dramatique* on the subject of the popular theater. In Rolland's interpretation and criticism of various current projects, his idealism has sometimes blinded him to practical and necessary compromises, but he remains the outstanding and most distinguished exponent of the popular-theater movement.

In the source material which the author of this present study has consulted, the term "popular theater" has been diversely defined. The exponents of the movement on the staff of the *Revue d'Art Dramatique,* including Romain Rolland, made it clear, however, that it did not mean merely another theater at cheap prices, where the people could go to be entertained with vaudeville or melodrama. They gave careful consideration to various aspects of an ideal popular theater. The writer of this study has interpreted "popular theater" broadly, to include the various connotations of the term suggested by the staff of the *Revue* in general and by Maurice Pottecher in particular.

Romain Rolland was particularly concerned with a theater for the working class, a theater to be established for those who could not afford to attend the ordinary bourgeois theater, the people for whom the repertory of the state theaters was not suitable. He found much to admire in the summer theater

at Bussang, founded by his friend Maurice Pottecher, who chose his actors from the bourgeoisie and common people alike and encouraged all classes of society to attend the performances. The ideal popular theater favored by Rolland was a socialistic enterprise designed to awaken the people to their glorious heritage and their right to happiness. Rolland recognized the diversity and gradation of opinions among those who championed some kind of "théâtre du peuple." He felt that among them there were two opposing groups: at one extreme were those who wished to give the people the theater as it was; at the other extreme were those who wanted a new theater and a new art to come from the people themselves. Rolland himself definitely favored the eventual realization of the latter enterprise, but he believed that an immediate step should be taken by his own group of intellectuals to formulate plans for a more suitable dramatic art for the people than those already existing.

The problem of the present study is to review the French popular-theater movement of the turn of the century in its immediate historical setting and to consider its value and significance in relation to the French democratic movement, particularly in the drama. The subject of this study is centered in the contributions of the *Revue d'Art Dramatique* in general and of Romain Rolland in particular to the popular-theater movement. The study involves a number of the major literary men of the period, but it is focussed mainly on those who at some time were contributors to the *Revue* and were active participants in the popular-theater movement during the period 1895-1903.

Discussion of certain historical prototypes of the popular-theater movement have a place in this study because they particularly interested the group of the *Revue d'Art Dramatique* and Romain Rolland. Although these men realized that various early folk (popular) theaters of the sixteenth century in France, Alsace, and Switzerland were not a true source of the late nineteenth-century movement, still they found in them diverse elements which appealed to them. Some space is de-

voted also to certain early French theorists whose ideas on the theater confirmed or influenced the ideas of Romain Rolland and of his collaborators on the *Revue,* who mentioned these theorists from time to time in connection with their own thinking about the common people and a popular theater. These earlier theorists include Rousseau, Diderot, and Michelet.

This study presents, furthermore, the essential questions raised in the many discussions published by the enthusiasts or critics of the *Revue,* at the period when the movement was at its height, and it makes passing reference to parallel popular-theater developments in other European countries which attracted the attention of the *Revue* and of Romain Rolland. Because of the special importance of Rolland's ideas and contributions, considerable space has been devoted to his theories and to his dramas intended for a popular theater, some of which were written and produced after 1903. As Maurice Pottecher and Eugène Morel also made very significant contributions to the movement, they have been given special consideration.

The social emphasis is a unifying factor in the study of the popular theater. Idealism linked with realism and a broader social outlook is an essential part of a generation's awakening to the fact that art and appreciation of art need not be limited to one class. In 1903 Rolland, in the Introduction to his *Théâtre du Peuple,* observed that the narrower concept of art was changing. He drew attention to the important point that, for ten years previous to the time of his writing, French art, the most aristocratic of all arts, had begun to realize that the common people existed and that art was beginning to use the masses as material for speeches, novels, and dramas. But he added that French art had not been considering "le peuple" as truly living beings, as a public worthy of consideration, and as a judge.

The social insistence that publications and productions assumed at the turn of the century resulted from the changes

in the economic, political, and social life and the consequent unrest of the period. These changes provided a natural soil out of which the popular-theater movement developed. Opposing currents of thought at this time only emphasized the fact that the movement was an outgrowth of the restlessness of the period. Discussions of conditions stimulated thinking and creative ability which led more and more in the direction of socialism. In the realm of the theater, the desire to get away from romantic unreality and from bourgeois *pièces à thèse* which dealt with problems of only one class and which were soon dated, stimulated certain thinkers to seek a more popular form of art for the theater.

Back of the popular-theater movement at the turn of the century in France, which was socialistic in outlook, were not only experiments such as those of the folk theaters, and the dramatic ideas of the early theorists, but also the development of the naturalistic theater. In its reaction against neoclassicism and romanticism, this theater touched the lives of the masses in its emphasis on the problems of humanity. Antoine's *Théâtre Libre* (1877-1894), which was naturalistic in principle, paved the way for the presentation of moral, psychological, and sociological ideas on the stage.

As a result of the Dreyfus affair, a number of writers attempted to resolve their "crise de conscience" either by defense of aristocratic traditions or by defending social justice not only in France but elsewhere. While Paul Bourget was declaring, through one of his characters, that universal suffrage would engender anarchy and Maurice Barrès was preaching nationalism and traditionalism, men like Romain Rolland and Jean Jaurès, in a revolutionary spirit, were urging internationalism and a need for action aimed toward social reform and more equality among men. Rolland and his friends were convinced that the theater was an excellent means of hastening the day when men of all classes and all nations would be more closely united in brotherhood.

Because of the unrest and dissatisfaction in a period when

civilization was scientific but not human, because of the interest in Tolstoy, and because of the Dreyfus affair in which a few took a perilous stand for justice, a number of bold enterprises were undertaken or encouraged by a group of young thinkers. These men, fired by a missionary zeal for reform, found an outlet in the projects of the *universités populaires,* in reviews, and in popular-theater projects.

In the popular-theater movement, which was a part of the general movement toward recognition of the masses, the author of this study has pointed out the contributions of certain important or significant men and has discussed a number of experiments carried out in Paris and in the provinces. Although certain theaters in Paris, such as Antoine's and Lugné-Poe's, were of the *avant-garde* type, still there were none organized particularly for the proletariat.

The *Revue d'Art Dramatique* holds a unique and important position among more widely known literary reviews of the 90's, such as the *Revue des Deux Mondes, Revue Bleue, Revue de Paris,* and the *Mercure de France.* It was the oldest and the most important of the publications devoted to the theater, and it counted among its contributors a number of eminent critics, authors, and artists. Many of these contributors were "écrivains de gauche" who were not afraid to stand for social reform by means of the theater and for a theater appealing to all classes of people, particularly to the proletariat.

As for the projects sponsored by the *Revue d'Art Dramatique,* the immediate results were disappointing. They did not create as much enthusiasm as the group had hoped. Such ideas as those published in the "Enquête" (1898) on the state of the theater, and those for a "Congrès international de théâtre populaire" had resulted in little action. The principal activity of the enthusiasts of the *Revue* had consisted in theorizing and in committee work, the efforts of which were disappointing. The government, enthusiastic at first about the popular-theater idea, wanted to take a hand in it — an

intervention that Rolland and the *Revue d'Art Dramatique* wanted to avoid at all costs because they feared that their freedom would thereby be limited. They preferred to struggle alone as best they could, but the struggle proved too much for them. After Adrien Bernheim's return from the inspection of popular-theater projects in nearby countries, a survey requested by the *Revue d'Art Dramatique,* and after he began his experiments in the workingmen's quarters of Paris, the group of the *Revue* was still dissatisfied and even disapproving. Because Bernheim's efforts were seconded by the government, they were rather antagonistic to the independent spirit of the *Revue.* Only Pottecher, outside of Paris, had been able to establish and carry on a successful popular-theater project.

The scattered attempts in Paris, instigated by the *Revue,* which were attracting attention at the turn of the century, had only a moderate success for a relatively short period of time. The Théâtre Civique directed by Louis Lumet, the theater of the *Coopération des Idées,* Bernheim's experiment backed by the government, Charpentier's lyric theater, E. Berny's theater at Belleville, and Henri Beaulieu's theater on the Avenue Clichy — all had the worthy aim of bringing something other than vaudeville and cheap melodrama to the masses. The common people, however, were not consistently attracted to the serious plays offered for their instruction and entertainment. After the novelty wore off, many of them returned to the *café-concert* or to the state theaters and it was the bourgeoisie who filled most of the seats in the "théâtres populaires." The ultimate fate of these enterprises is obscure through lack of available information or documentation.

On the other hand, the summer performances in popular theaters in various regions of France have had more favorable results than those in the city, yet their importance have been negligible, except for Maurice Pottecher's theater project in the Vosges Mountains.

While endless discussions about the popular theater were going on in Paris, Pottecher was developing his own "théâtre

du peuple" outside the city. Though he himself might have gained recognition in the field of literature and the theater in Paris, he preferred not to struggle hopelessly, as it seemed, against the insincerity of many in the theater world and their lack of interest in the social ideals of the enthusiasts of the *Revue d'Art Dramatique.* Hence he was a pioneer in the 90's in founding the first successful popular open-air theater of that period in France. Because of his energy, enthusiasm, and personality, he succeeded in founding a unique theater which has continued to the present time. Pottecher's success has been due to such factors as the devotion and cooperation of his actors, amateurs who contribute their services; the enthusiasm and skill of his co-workers; the attraction of a well-equipped rustic theater in a delightful setting; a complete liberty of choice in dramas written to appeal to all classes; and an opportunity to improve the theater rather than to reimburse the actors. As a result of this favorable combination of elements, the enterprise enjoys a healthy and contageous spirit of fraternity.

Eugène Morel, winner in 1900 of the prize for the best project for a popular theater, also had many good ideas. The ideal theater was to be open to all and was to be less "raffiné" than the theater for the elite but without the "grossièretés" in which the masses usually indulged. But unfortunately Morel's report brought about few practical results: no acceptable funds were secured, no new theater was built. Only discussion and debate went on in Paris.

There can be no doubt that in Paris Romain Rolland, already an established literary personality by the end of the century, dominated the popular-theater movement. He never lost his social idealism in spite of discouragements and many setbacks. Idealist that he was, he was unwilling to be "practical" and to make compromises, no matter what the difficulties might be in establishing his ideal popular theater. He wished ardently to associate literature and art with social responsibility. As a follower of Tolstoy, he wanted to make the best art, particularly dramatic art, available and appealing

to the masses. To this end he devoted much of his time and energy. Though he seemed to urge a nationalistic theater, it was only because the glorious past of France, as represented in the drama of the Revolution, was for him the greatest political and social movement of and for humanity. Rolland's historical drama, nationalistic in subject, contains the essence of his internationalism. Socialism in its broadest sense appealed to him. In spite of his intransigent ideas about the ideal popular theater, Rolland early sensed the fact that he and his generation would probably be unable to create this new art, though they might be able to prepare the way for others.

Few of the popular-theater group seemed disposed to concentrate on a repertory for the project. *Les Mauvais Bergers* by Octave Mirbeau, one of Rolland's most active supporters, was considered by some as suitable for a popular theater along with Rolland's plays intended for such a theater. But Mirbeau's plays lacked sufficient popularity and Rolland's plays rarely found their way to a popular-theater stage. Unfortunately for the success of the movement, a number of outstanding writers and critics were too conservative to risk their career by defending and actively supporting a project with a socialistic trend. Most of these men whose names were linked for a time with it went only so far as to theorize, rarely joining in experiments or in writing plays for it.

One of the reasons for the failure or partial failure of the popular-theater movement was that no great play or plays were written for this kind of theater. Romain Rolland devoted his time, energy, and thought to attempts to write suitable dramas, but his special genius lay chiefly in the philosophical novel, not in the theater. The plays of Lucien Besnard and of Mirbeau, although realistic and socialistic, lacked sufficient genius. Anatole France's *Crainquebille,* a play of the people and powerfully human, was not given sufficient trial. The plays of Paul Claudel had elements of popular appeal, but the stages in Paris were not organized to produce his vast compositions similar to great primitive

paintings. Emile Fabre, less brilliant than Claudel, was a realist of the Théâtre Libre who succeeded in two of his plays, *La Vie publique* (1902) and *Les Ventres dorés* (1905), in presenting "la foule" as a single individual as did Romain Rolland in *Le 14 Juillet*. But he lacked the qualities necessary to write plays fully comprehensible to a popular audience.

The efforts made by the enthusiasts of the *Revue d'Art Dramatique* were not strong enough to carry the popular-theater movement. A new and important development in the entertainment world was soon to exert tremendous influence. This was the cinema. From its beginning it continued to progress, at least in technique and popularity, though few of the most brilliant French dramatists offered their talent, time, and effort to work for it. In the Western World the theater has lost its old supremacy in entertainment. Wars have altered the rhythm of social life and disoriented public taste. The cinema, radio, phonograph, and sports have contributed to this change. It has become more and more difficult for the traditional theater to hold the interest of the public which modern life has called to other pleasures, more easily and more cheaply obtained.

In attempting to establish a successful popular theater, certain vital problems were left unsolved by the enthusiasts of the *Revue d'Art Dramatique*. They were unable to answer the question of whether social reform can be imposed from above, or whether it must respond to a real need, expressed by the masses themselves. Perhaps it is not a matter of one or the other but of all classes working together for social improvement in all realms of living, including art and entertainment.

In spite of the weakness of the popular-theater movement, it has a useful and significant place in the history of French dramatic art. Even though Romain Rolland seemed to have little appeal as a playwright for the common people, he firmly expressed an optimistic and constructive philosophy: that man continually climbs toward the heights, though "il monte en

lacets"; that one must have faith in human progress in all fields of endeavor, in spite of serious setbacks, or else life is futile; and that all noble efforts (such as bringing art to the masses), although beset by disappointments, are important and noteworthy. Rolland's work for the popular theater is a case in point. He and his friends believed in the common man and recognized his need for leisure and constructive entertainment. Because of this belief, actively expressed, the popular-theater movement is a part of the general movement toward the recognition of "le peuple." Although the popular theater may not have continued to develop as Romain Rolland and his group envisioned it, still in a larger sense the conception is a part of a significant trend in the broadening current of change paralleling democratic trends in French society. The cinema, certainly a popular form of entertainment for all classes, can never completely replace the traditional theater. The theater is more human than its rival. The close communion between the actor and audience creates a warmth that cinema entertainment lacks.

After the first fires of enthusiasm had burned out in Paris, sporadic attempts were made to establish a sort of popular theater. In 1919 and 1920 efforts were made in Paris to carry out on the stage a few of the ideas already proposed by the popular-theater enthusiasts of the *Revue d'Art Dramatique.* Firmin Gémier, manager for a time of the Théâtre Antoine, was making an attempt to establish a theater to reach all the people, and to this end he gave huge performances in the Cirque d'Hiver and in the Trocadéro. Gaston Baty, for a time associated with Gémier, likewise attempted to establish a theater for all the people. Other occasional attempts have been made in Paris from time to time, with more or less success.

The second World War and the Occupation stopped, of course, experimentation in the theater. It made a definite break with the past and one cannot predict what the new trends of the theater will be. Some of those who desire to

work in the field of the theater are looking toward America for ideas and suggestions, particularly to our experimental theaters where young people can work independently of those averse to change.

It may be expected that, whatever the inspiration and impetus gained from abroad, any new developments in broadening the theater in France will benefit from the ideas and experiments of the long line of pioneers in the popular-theater movement.

VITA

Helen W. Machan was born October 4, 1900, in Providence, Rhode Island. After graduating from Decatur, (Illinois) High School, she entered James Millikin University (Decatur, Illinois) and received the degree of Bachelor of Arts, with honors, in June, 1921. She was an instructor in French in the Mattoon (Illinois) High School from 1921-1923 and from 1924-1926. She spent the year 1923-1924 studying at the University of Grenoble, France. She was an instructor in French at Blackburn College (Carlinville, Illinois) from 1926-1935. She received her Master of Arts degree from Teachers College, Columbia University in December, 1929, after studying from February to June at the University of Paris in connection with the degree. Since 1935 she has been on the faculty at Kent State University (Kent, Ohio), in the Foreign Language Department. She entered the Graduate College of the University of Illinois the summer of 1936, spent the winter of 1937-1938 and the summers of 1938, 1939, 1940, and 1941 in residence. She is a member of Phi Kappa Phi, Pi Delta Phi (French), Sigma Delta Pi (Spanish), and Delta Kappa Gamma (National Honorary — Teachers). She is also a member of the Modern Language Association, the Association of Teachers of French, and the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese. She is the author of several articles in the *Modern Language Journal.*